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ABSTRACT

This paper reports attempts to alter children's moral judgments via short-term training of roletaking skills in order to assess the degree of relationship between moral reasoning and roletaking. In a three phase procedure, 40 first-grade children (20 males and 20 females) were assigned to one of four experimental groups (empathic, reciprocal, cognitive role training, and control). In the first phase, subjects' pretraining level of moral reasoning was assessed. Subjects were administered four moral judgment stories, two of positive intention/negative consequence and two of negative intention/positive consequence. Following the presentation of these stories, each child underwent one of the four 20 minute experimental treatment sessions. Immediately after the treatment session each child was administered four additional moral judgment stories as post-treatment assessment of moral reasoning. It was expected that those subjects undertaking role training would show a greater increase in maturity of moral reasoning than would the control group. Findings suggest that roletaking might be linked to the development of moral reasoning, although not directly, and that story content may be an important variable in analyzing the maturity of response. The finding of differences in judgment between roletakers and non-roletakers in the cognitive groups suggests a link between roletaking and moral judgment. In general, these findings provide further support for Piaget's basic theoretical notions concerning the child's moral judgment. (Author/MP)

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Moral Judgments and Roletaking Skills in First Graders

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Running head: Roletaking

Moral Judgments and Roletaking Skills
in First Graders

In Piaget's (1932) basic theoretical framework, children under 7 or 8 years old make judgments primarily on the basis of the consequences of an action. So that a child who breaks 15 dishes while trying to help mother set the table is seen as deserving more punishment than the child who breaks only one dish running about the house creating havoc. Older children, on the other hand, utilize intentions in making judgments. In general this framework has received adequate support in literature.

Ever since Piaget proposed this two-stage theory researchers have attempted to discover factors which underlie the transition from consequence-to intention-based judgments. Several factors have been suggested such as specific training (Bandura & McDonald, 1963), decentration (Stuart, 1967), and loss of egocentrism or roletaking (Selman, 1971). Piaget hypothesized that this shift was a result of the lessening of parental constraint and the increased cooperation among peers which enable the child to become more adept as taking another's point of view.

This project centered on roletaking; hypothesizing that the same roletaking abilities that enable the child to take another's point of view might be a factor in leading to more subjective moral judgments. This project attempted to alter moral judgments via the short-term training of roletaking skills, thereby establishing the link between moral reasoning and roletaking. It was expected that those subjects undertaking

roletraining would show a greater increase in maturity of moral reasoning than a control group.

Method

Forty first-grade children (20 males and 20 females) were assigned to one of four experimental groups. In the first phase all children were administered four moral judgment stories (two of positive intention/negative consequence and two of negative intention/positive consequence). This procedure assessed the pretraining level of moral reasoning. The following is an example of a typical story:

> "Jill was helping Nancy on the swing by giving her a push. But one time Jill pushed too hard and Nancy fell off the swing and skinned her knee."

This story depicts a positive intention (helping) and a negative consequence (skinning the knee). The child is asked if Jill is good or bad; the reasons for this judgment; and asked to rate Jill on an 8-point scale ranging from very bad (a rating of 1) to very good (a rating of 8).

Following these stories each child underwent one of four experimental treatment sessions lasting approximately twenty minutes. These groups were designated as empathic, reciprocal and cognitive role training in addition to a control group. Immediately following this session each child was administered four additional moral judgment stories as post-treatment assessment of moral reasoning.

Cognitive roletaking involves awareness of another's point of reference on spatial-perspective tasks. An adaptation of the Piagetian mountains task revised by Coie, Costanzo and Farnill (1974) was used.

Empathic roletaking requires children to be perceptive of the emotions of other children. Here, pictures were used in which one child expresses an emotion contrary to the surrounding environment. The procedure follows that of Burns and Cavey (1951). Reciprocal roletaking consists of anticipating the actions of another person in an interaction, given the fact that the person is not privy to the same information as the subject. Flavell's (1968) tasks were used to assess this skill. In the control group a story was read to the child. In each of the roletaking sessions, a pretest of roletaking skills was given, followed by a brief training session and a subsequent posttest of roleskills.

Results and Discussion

Unfortunately the design was inadequate for the proper testing of the stated hypothesis. Nonetheless, post-hoc analyses yielded several interesting and relevant findings. In general the findings provided further support to Piaget's basic theoretical notions. These first graders tend to make judgments predominantly on the basis of consequence, t (38) = 4.88, $p < .01$. The actors in stories of negative consequences were given lower ratings than the actors in stories with positive consequences even though contrary intentions existed (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

The analyses of the roletraining sessions demonstrated the inadequacies of the design. I would now hesitate to use the word "training"

in describing the procedures, opting instead for the word "exposure." Reflecting back on the experiment, I admit some naivité in expecting that in a short half-hour session, children would be trained to any degree of proficiency in these skills.

Little relevant data exists from the analyses of the empathy group. Nearly all of the children were proficient at this task and the task was probably not an appropriate measure for this age group.

The reciprocal condition elicited the only trend approaching significance between pre- and posttests of moral judgment, t (19) = 2.15, $p < .10$. However, it was in the opposite direction from that which was predicted (see Table 2). We had originally expected that in the negative intention/positive consequence stories, the more mature response would be displayed through an increase in the use of intention, i.e. a lower rating. A closer investigation, however, reveals a more complex situation. Most of the change in scores stems from a single story-type which involves violation of authority with a positive consequence, t (19) = 3.33, $p < .02$ (see Table 3). For authority-based children the most salient aspect of the story may be the violation of the rule whereas a more mature response takes into account both the disobedience and the positive consequence.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

The cognitive group did not show any effects of roletraining but did appear to provide some evidence for a link between roletaking and moral judgments. If the group is divided into roletakers and nonroletakers

(determined by a median split); the data reveal evidence that roletakers show a more mature type of response. Nonroletakers rated the negative- and positive- consequence stories as distinctly different and predominantly made consequence-based judgments, t (4) = 3.24, $p < .05$. Roletakers did not. This suggests that the roletakers may have begun to take both intention and consequence into account in their judgments (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here

In conclusion the findings suggest that roletaking might be linked to the development of moral reasoning, although not directly, and that story content may be an important variable in analyzing the maturity of response. The finding of differences in judgment between roletakers and nonroletakers in the cognitive groups suggests a link between roletaking and moral judgment. Perhaps in a more controlled setting, training of these skills might still be viable. There is the indication that children might be using the same processes when making moral judgments and in spatial perspective-taking. Selman (1971) suggests that the roletaking ability is a necessary condition for the onset of intention-based moral judgments. The story content differences suggest that Piaget's unidemensional approach to moral judgment may be too simplistic. Revision of Piagetian theory may be necessary to examine the settings that promote more or less use of intention in children's moral reasoning. This variable should be considered in greater detail in future research.

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Table 1

Overall Story Character Ratings

Intention	Story Content	
Consequence	Positive	Negative
Test	Negative	Positive
Pretest	2.50	3.86
Posttest	2.58	4.09*

*$p < .01$ (overall main effect for story type)

Table 2

Pre- and Post-test Scores for Reciprocal Role training on Negative Intention/ Positive Consequence Stories

Pretest	Posttest
2.95	4.55*

*$p < .10$

Table 3

Pre- and Posttest Scores for Reciprocal Roletraining on Violation of Authority Stories

	Prestest	Posttest
Story 1	1.00	5.40*
Story 2	1.75	3.25

*$p < .02$

Table 4

Mean Story Character Ratings for Cognitive Roletakers and Nonroletakers

	Story Content			
Intention	Positive		Negative	
Consequence	Negative		Positive	
Story Group	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Roletakers	3.30	3.10	3.60	3.10
Nonroletakers	1.90	2.00	5.10	4.00